

# Fighting Conflict in Your Marriage

Have you ever heard it said, "I was so angry, I couldn't see straight?" There's some physiological truth to that statement. In his book, *How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others and Resolve Conflicts*, Dr. Robert Bolton says, "Emotional arousal actually makes us different people than who we are in moments of greater calmness. When we are angry or fearful, our adrenalin flows faster and our strength increases by about 20 percent. The blood supply to the problem-solving part of the brain is severely decreased because, under stress, a greater portion of blood is diverted to the body's extremities."

The best way to visualize the effects of fear, anger or rage on your mind and body is to imagine yourself being chased by a bear. In response to seeing the bear, a part of the brain called the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) system is activated. Among other things, the HPA system releases certain neurotransmitters (chemical messengers) including epinephrine -- commonly called adrenaline. Adrenaline suppresses activity in areas at the front of the brain concerned with short-term memory, concentration, inhibition, and rational thought. This sequence of mental events allows a person to react quickly to the bear, either to fight or to flee from it. But it also hinders the ability to handle rational problem solving.

**In a state of anger or rage, a person may be well-equipped for a brawl with a bear, but very poorly equipped to work through and solve a problem.**

So, before you attempt to resolve conflict, it's important to cool down first. One way to do this is by "taking a break." Let's say you and your spouse are arguing, things are getting pretty intense, and the ugly words are starting to fly. That's when one of you should try to muster-up the calmness to say, "Let's take a break." Then the person who called for the break immediately sets a time when you'll have the discussion again. By then, you will have had time to calmly think about the issue and resolve not to let things get personal with name-calling or yelling.

Of course "taking a break" in the midst of battle is more easily said than done. Recently my wife and I were having a heated discussion. At first I followed my own advice and suggested we "take a break" so we could cool off. But, a few minutes later I just had to make one more point...and that's when things got really hot. So to be effective, both parties have to agree to abide by "taking a break."

Resolving conflict can be one of the biggest challenges in marriage. When conflict goes unresolved, it causes tension and builds a wall between husband and wife. When attempts at addressing conflict are unproductive or harsh, it can lead to resentment, discouragement and even bigger problems than you faced originally.

So, after you've cooled down and taken a break, how can you address conflict successfully in your marriage? One way is to practice the R.E.S.T. method.

**R is for Review the Problem**

Too often couples try to jump ahead to solving the problem even before they've clearly identified what the problem is. So, sit down with your spouse and try to pinpoint the exact issue. While you're doing this, use the drive-through communication method. Marriage expert Gary Smalley says it works the same way a drive-through window works. One person speaks at a time, then the other repeats back what they heard. "Honey, I'm tired of the way you come home from work and immediately sit in front of the TV. It makes me feel like the TV is more important to you than I am." Then the other person repeats it back. "Ok. So it bothers you when I come home and go right for the TV. It makes you feel unimportant."

See how that works? Now, a couple of other important points. Keep things in the "I" as much as you can, instead of the "you." Talk about how you feel and try not to be accusing. Talk in feelings and facts only. Don't give your opinions or assume you know how the other person is feeling. Just give your side.

Another thing, make sure you identify the real issue - the fire - not the smoke around it. For example, your husband or wife explodes because you spent \$50 on something they didn't think you needed. Well, it might look like money is the issue. But, it could be that they're feeling pressure at work and are afraid of losing their job and income. Or, they really want to try to save money. Get beyond the smoke to the fire.

### **E is for Evaluate Options**

Now that you've nailed down the issue, discuss the different options for solving it. Again, use the drive-through communication method. And, don't criticize the options by saying things like, "That will never work. Yeah, right." Be as specific as you can. Don't just say, "Spend less money." Come up with solutions that can be measured. Make it a real brainstorming session where you just say whatever comes to mind. Talk through each option, there might be some bit of good in it, even if the entire option is not the exact fit.

### **S is for Solving the Problem**

This is where you select an option and put it into action. During the selection process, be open to compromise. Remember, if things don't work out you'll have an opportunity later to readdress the issue and options.

### **T is for Track Your Progress**

Don't skip this step unless you're making a decision on a one-time event or occurrence like where to go for vacation. In most cases, you'll want to set a specific time to sit down and talk about how your solution is working. You might want to do this at your regular couples meeting.

You'll use the drive-through communication method here too. First, look at the option you chose and see if you've followed it. Then determine if it's really helping to solve the problem. Don't be discouraged if things haven't gone perfectly. This is a process. Regroup and reassess if you need to. Make adjustments. You might need to go back to identifying the problem or select another option.

So, the next time you experience conflict in your marriage (and all couples will) try to solve it by putting conflict to rest -- R.E.S.T.

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